Long used as a synonym for “government,” the word “governance” has, in the last 10 years or so, been given a new theoretical status and centrality within political studies. A growing body of work whose concern is to chart the transformation of political order is taking shape under the rubric of governance. At its core, this governance or “new” governance literature suggests that the nature of political rule has changed quite fundamentally. Contrary to those who once called for political studies to “bring back the state,” research on governance is skeptical about the conceptual centrality and validity of the state. Theorists of governance argue that the age when the state monopolized and was synonymous with governance is passing, the image of authority flowing from a fixed, institutional centre outmoded. Instead, they insist we inhabit a world characterized by governance. As societies have become more complex, and social demands have proliferated, political authority has become polycentric and multileveled. Rule operates not over but in a complex relationship with a dense field of public and private actors. Lines between public and private have become blurred.

Given the prominence of governance and its growing use in policy circles, it is surprising that the critical literature in this area is not more extensive. There is a striking imbalance between the exponential growth of a literature applying governance to particular cases and areas, and research that critically examines the foundational assumptions and political implications of governance. There have certainly been a number of helpful overviews of governance which have sought to clarify many of its ambiguities. For instance, these have surveyed different uses of governance, such as “corporate governance” and governance as “new public management,” and
they have compared its uses in different subfields of political science. However, these have been largely sympathetic commentaries by advocates of the concept. There is work which explores the relationship of the idea of governance to transformations in the political economy of capitalism, and shifts in the organization of the state. Yet despite its value in locating governance in terms of societal change, such work tends to treat governance as a new policy style that reflects deeper structural changes. It is not interrogated sufficiently as a mutation within political reason.

This paper follows the lead of a number of researchers who have begun to redress this asymmetry between applications and interrogations of governance. It aims to challenge the growing tendency to use governance as a generic category which subsumes the study of politics. If the term governance has acquired a certain kind of self-evident status, the point is to open a space of reflection around it. What are the unspoken tacit presuppositions which attach to the discourse of governance? What claims does governance make about the character of politics today? As a discourse about political order, what are its antecedents?

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first part addresses the question “what is governance?” There is considerable elasticity in the way that governance is used. The term is now employed in a great many settings including international relations (global governance), development policy (good governance), European Union studies (multilevel or European governance), finance and management (corporate governance), and at many levels of public policy (e.g., urban governance). Obviously the meaning of governance changes as we move from one policy area to the next. Nevertheless, there are also continuities, certain core ideas, assumptions and propositions which attach to the term as it moves from one locale to the next. It is these that interest me, and which—at the risk of generating a governance straw person—I set out in the first section.

The second part summarizes what I see as the major contribution of governance to political studies. This section is brief since its benefits have been set out elsewhere. Yet this section is important since my aim is not to simply dismiss governance but rather to call for greater reflexivity in its use. The final section of the paper proposes three lines of criticism regarding governance.
It criticizes governance as 1) a largely antipolitical perspective on political problems; 2) a mistaken political sociology of power relations and the state, and 3) a developmental narrative about political and social change. The point of the essay is not to write the definitive critique of governance but instead to suggest several axes along which the contemporary debate about governance might be widened and deepened in more reflexive and critical directions. As I conclude, the term governance is now widely used both by policy practitioners and by students of politics. Hence it seems appropriate to reflect on some of the limitations and risks consequent upon this turn.

**What is Governance?** There are four themes which I take to characterize the analytical and theoretical focus of governance. First, it involves a shift in the analytical focus for political studies: from “institutions” to “processes” of rule. Governance, we are told, is broader than government: “The essence of governance is its focus on governing mechanisms which do not rest on the recourse to the authority and sanctions of government.” Often the novelty of governance is cast in terms of a contrast between structures and processes. Governance is not something fixed but a process that is altogether more fluid: “a broad, dynamic, complex process of interactive decision-making that is constantly evolving and responding to changing circumstances.” Particularly within comparative politics, scholars have developed this point in terms of a comparison between the “old” and the “new” governance. Old governance describes a world in which economy, society, and even the state itself are governed from fixed centres of authority in a top-down fashion. New governance pertains to a novel form of society in which the traditional goals of governments—welfare, prosperity, and security—can no longer be accomplished by the centre acting alone. Increasingly they are sought through processes of concertation, interaction, networking, piloting and steering; processes in which traditional centres of authority (ministries, agencies, public bureaucracies) interact in networked configurations with, and through a host of private, para-state, third sector, voluntary and other groups.

A second theme which distinguishes governance theory is its emphasis on “self-governing networks.” Hindess has written about the “ubiquitous
modern view of politics which sees ‘economy,’ ‘state’ and ‘society’ as distinct but largely coextensive systems of social organization.” With its emphasis on multiple connections and networks, governance seems to depart from this position. If the social sciences borrowed their metaphors from physics and biology when advancing this “modern view,” then the discourse on governance takes its language from more recent developments in the bio-informational sciences. Drawing on the imagery of cybernetics and complexity theory, governance presents a conceptual landscape of self-regulating systems and “proliferating networks.” “Governance is about managing networks.” It is “a continuous process of evolution, a becoming that fluctuates between order and disorder.” Governance takes place within, and in relation to, networks presumed to have their own autonomy and materiality.

A third feature of governance is its particular narrative of social change. It is embedded in a discourse that now pervades the world of corporate, commercial and public life—the constantly reiterated claim that we inhabit a world of “accelerating change and complexity.” This is the single premise from which many studies of governance start. Put simply, the world has become more complex and complicated. “Never before has change come so rapidly, on such a global scale, and with such global visibility.” We face “growing complexity and continuing disaggregation.”

What is the source of this increasing complexity, this proliferation of organizations and actors? What has made the world beyond the state so resistant to hierarchical forms of rule? Common reference is made to such factors as the massive growth of financial and other markets, information and communication “revolutions,” new forms of mass migration, and the end of Communism. But equally important are political and cultural transformations which are seen to give rise to concerns with equity, democracy, human rights, environmentalism, regional, and local autonomy. As many see it, there has been a cultural shift amongst the public who demand empowerment, choice, and consultation. Against this backdrop there has been an “organizational explosion” which is no less consequential than the “population explosion.”

The final aspect of governance approaches that I want to highlight concerns their view of the state. Governance theory resonates with a powerful
current in the social sciences which announces the eclipse or declining authority of the nation-state, and the erosion of state sovereignty. These arguments are particularly common within studies of European governance. Where once states reigned exclusively over the policymaking process, this monopoly is no more; now they must make room for a growing range of international, supranational, and private actors and representatives of civil society. The rise of governance—networks, co-ordination, heterarchy—is a response to the failure of state-centred and market-oriented approaches to governing. The state does not become irrelevant, but rather assumes a new role that Bob Jessop describes as “meta-governance, i.e., coordinating different forms of governance and ensuring a minimal coherence among them.”

The Contribution of Governance Theory The main aim of this paper is to interrogate the discourse of governance, to problematize some of its founding assumptions and suggest its major shortcomings. However, it is not my aim to present governance theory in a singularly negative light. The point is not a wholesale rejection of governance but to urge greater reflexivity in its use. Before entering into a critique of governance, I want to summarize what I take to be some of the important contributions it has made to political understanding—both at the level of political knowledge and political practice.

Most obviously, governance speaks to important political transformations of our time. As a field that is always in flux, politics threatens to escape the terms we have at hand to comprehend it. Our time is indeed one of great experimentation and pluralization of forms of government. Governance promises us a language that can capture key aspects of these changes.

But if governance is useful as a matrix for thinking the present, it also represents several beneficial developments within political science and political economy. First, it suggests a welcome reorientation of political studies towards the “mechanics” of governing, a question that had for some time been the specialized preserve of public administration. Peters is therefore right to see governance as a “healthy antidote” to the great volume of political science which, in its quest to understand voting and public opinion, has
had very little to say about “what governments actually do.” Second, governance does this without recentring the state at a theoretical level. It avoids the tendency which Foucault, among others, identifies; namely, “over-valuing the ‘problem of the State,’ seeing it either as a ‘monstre froid’ confronting and dominating us, or as the essential and privileged fulfillment of a number of necessary social and economic functions.”

As a number of scholars have noted, the image of the limited state standing apart from a largely self-organizing civil society and economy may have been an enduring classical liberal image, but it is not an adequate concept for studying modern power. Governance theory is to be commended for foregrounding the multiple ties which traverse this boundary, and the need to think about how such relations might be subjected to accountability and democratic control.

Rather than seeing them as complications for the state/society division, governance sees them as the norm. Governance recognizes that private government has insinuated the social body. It connects mainstream political science to arguments that have long been made within feminism and Marxism: that regulation operates in homes, firms, schools and many other sites beyond the domain of institutional politics. By adopting the language of networks, it helps to loosen the spell that the state—and its inside/outside, centre/periphery image—has cast on political studies, enabling us to glimpse the new topographies of political authority. Nowhere is this more evident than in thinking about democracy and citizenship. Whereas such questions have traditionally been posed within the framework of the nation-state, governance allows a debate to take place in which questions of representation, rights, and accountability can proceed at different political levels and scales simultaneously. This is particularly the case with notions of “cosmopolitan governance.”

Finally, as I have already hinted, governance signifies something of an “epistemological” shift for political science. For too long now, liberal and radical work on politics has been under the sway of what John Allen, following Bruno Latour, terms a “centred view of power.” Power is understood as “stored” at particular institutional sites, such as economic corporations or state apparatuses. It is then exercised across a social field. By
foregrounding how governing operates through networks which associate multiple actors and sites, governance nudges political science and political economy towards a more relational and associational understanding of power—a view which has for some time been more common in disciplines like sociology and human geography.31

Yet in spite of these benefits, there remain some serious flaws, simplifications, and misunderstandings in governance. The third section of the paper sets out three criticisms of governance.

Three Criticisms of Governance

The Antipolitics of Governance: Displacing Political Conflict? My first criticism of governance relates to some fundamental assumptions about the nature of politics which it seems to embody, assumptions which have to date passed largely unchallenged. Here I address two issues. First, I explore the technocratic predisposition of governance discourse, then I broaden this point to suggest that, despite its thematization of inclusivity and collective problem-solving, in certain ways governance discourse embodies antipolitical motifs and tendencies.

If the Trilateral Commission’s famous 1977 Crisis of Democracy report is in any way indicative of international elite opinion, then less than three decades ago many international policymakers were preoccupied with fears of “ungovernability” and democratic “overload.” Their concern was that certain sections of the population were demanding too much of governments. Perhaps on this basis we should deem governance discourse as a democratic and progressive development within national and international politics—for governance arguments stress participation and the inclusion of “civil society.” They foreground themes of representation, transparency, and accountability. They legitimate, and seem to open a space for the involvement of the governed. They give visibility and accord a role as partners to many actors who did not previously figure as proper actors within the schemes of public policy. Governance has legitimated a notable widening of the public arena, whether at national levels, where the consultation of a whole range of actors now subjectified as “communities,” “partners” and “stakeholders” has become
obligatory, or within international fora. The phenomena of UN special conferences—Cairo, Beijing, Copenhagen, Durban, etc.—might be seen in this light.\textsuperscript{32}

Yet governance’s promise of greater inclusion and participation is not a simple one. Critics have expressed grave doubts about the place of democracy within the “good governance” agenda of the leading development institutions. Hirst, for instance, detects a narrow, instrumental conception of democracy which functions as little more than an institutional support for market-oriented reforms. In a context where good governance is equated with “creating an effective political framework conducive to private economic action,” democracy is valued mainly “if it provides legitimization for good governance. Multi-party competition and free elections are valuable in preventing cronyism and corruption, and in building public support for development strategies, but only if parties eschew extremism and play the political game by the appropriate liberal rules.”\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, Vincent Della Sala has highlighted the way in which governance in the global institutions context operates not as a site of politics but as a space of technocratic management. The talk is of “reinventing government,” “best practices,” and innumerable “partnerships.” The World Bank, for instance, champions the use of “diagnostic survey instruments” as a means to identify “best practices” which will, in turn, promote good governance.\textsuperscript{34} “Good governance” offers the major powers, development, and lending agencies an apparently less political and more technical basis to call for political reform than does “reform of the state.”\textsuperscript{35} On this reading, governance is not really about the expansion of democracy but the search for more effective and efficient forms of problem management.

It is perhaps not surprising that the understanding of governance produced by national and international elites should have a technocratic flavour to it. But what if we consider governance as it is used more broadly by academics, social movements and other “non-state” actors? Here I want to argue that although governance is often not used in a narrowly instrumental fashion, it nevertheless embodies a very particular view of politics—as the search for political consensus and problemsolving. This particular view masquerades as a more general account.
If we situate governance within a wider field of political analysis and prescription, its political and epistemological profile becomes clearer. It immediately becomes apparent that it is founded upon a liberal norm of consensus and mutual accommodation. As de Alcántara notes in her discussion of the term, “‘governance’ involves building consensus, or obtaining the consent or acquiescence necessary to carry out a programme, in an arena where many different interests are in play.”

Consider the viewpoint of the Commission for Global Governance: “A multifaceted strategy for global governance is required… . It will foster global citizenship and work to include poorer, marginalized, and alienated segments of national and international society.”

Or as another recent policy paper has put it, governance is “not one, but a network of inter-related activities through which societies or communities articulate their interests and reach decisions.”

To grasp the political specificity of governance, we need to contrast it with other political discourses and metanarratives such as Marxism, radical and socialist feminisms, nationalism, anticolonialism, realpolitik and high geopolitics, *altermondialisation*, or even certain strands of liberal pluralism. These are political languages which foreground the fundamental antagonisms traversing the social space. Each recognizes the irreducible perspectives of its participants and emphasizes the play of fundamental oppositions. For many of them, politics is a game of struggle, contestation, and social transformation.

Governance, on the other hand, marks the space of a liberal game of assimilation. Where many political discourses seek to articulate a field of antagonistic forces as agents of political transformation, governance seeks to implicate them as “partners” in a game of collective self-management and modulated social adjustment. Governance does not deny that societies contain groups with different interests and conflicting agendas but it does not see these differences as threats to the social order. On the contrary, as a particular art of government, governance is about harnessing these different “inputs” and engaging the plurality of “stakeholders” and “partners” in an ongoing process of problemsolving through “mutual confrontation,” a confrontation that can be functional to the advancement of society. Hence, we can observe that governance is broadly consistent with a formula of government that Jacques Donzelot calls “the mobilization of...
society,” a strategy where “the problems of the state (are) to rebound back on to society, so that society is implicated in the task of resolving them, where previously the state was expected to hand down an answer for society’s needs.” Importantly, Donzelot also observes that this formula only comes into play under political and historical conditions where social conflicts no longer seem to threaten the structure of society. In other words, perhaps we can say that governance pertains to a political culture that no longer sees itself at risk from fundamental class or geopolitical divisions, where instead of threatening social order, social conflicts can now be harnessed to serve political ends.

The discourse of global governance exemplifies this assimilationist tendency. It does not disregard the plight of the poor and the disenfranchised, nor assume their predicament can be satisfactorily addressed with a formula of “more market.” On the contrary, global governance often identifies the fact of global poverty as something calling for political reform. However, it is a narrow and tightly circumscribed form of political agency which governance accords to its subjects. The poor are recognized as political subjects only insofar as they might become responsible partners within the proliferating networks of governance. These groups are defined from the point of view of their possible/potential inclusion within this system of self-management. Governance discourse will not concede that its “others” may have interests that are fundamentally incompatible or antagonistic to the present order of power, that their “exclusion” is a structural effect rather than a remediable anomaly, or that inclusion would imply a fundamental reordering of this system.

My argument is that governance discourse seeks to redefine the political field in terms of a game of assimilation and integration. It displaces talk of politics as struggle or conflict. It resonates with “end of class” and “end of history” narratives in that it imagines a politics of multilevel collective self-management, a politics without enemies. Yet governance is by no means alone in this endeavour. On the contrary, it is consonant with some prominent conceptual developments in other areas of the social sciences. We can identify a genre of discourses which express a certain ambivalence towards politics and which seek to sublimate political struggle in terms of visions of
unified, cohesive societies and communities. These include the contemporary rationalities of social capital, civil society, social cohesion, and various other communitarianisms. An investigation of their logic is well beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, we can briefly note some of their points of overlap.

First, these themes have all become more prominent in the last 10 years or so. They promise to transcend the market versus state dichotomy which defined the political space of the postwar period. In some ways, then, they pertain to an emerging political settlement, a redefined middle-ground. Second, they have a certain postideological claim to be pragmatic and solutions-oriented. Inasmuch as they espouse a politics based on dialogue, inclusion, and consensus, theories of governance and social capital might be regarded as liberal discourses. But they are not ideological in the strong sense of the term. Their exponents do not regard these as systems of ideas caught up in a struggle for hegemony with rival systems. Governance is not engaged in a struggle for hearts and minds in the way that liberal democracy saw itself battling with communism or fascism. The enemies of governance and these cognate discourses are not other political ideologies but seemingly nonpolitical foes such as corruption, disorder, distrust, political alienation, bad governance, and so on.

Perhaps it is the ethical rather than the explicitly political character of these discourses which accounts for their political appeal. In their very name they lay claim to social and cultural values that are surely beyond criticism. Governance is seductive. Who would possibly prefer chaos or discord to governance? Who does not support strong communities? Who does not think responsibility and civility are to be prized? Who is not in favour of greater trust amongst people? Questions of political conflict are obviated, displaced, or sublimated by an appeal to universal values and virtues, and the need to cultivate the mechanisms and institutions which promote them.

**Governance as Political Sociology: Mis-Comparing the State?** My second criticism of governance theory pertains to its narrative of the state. The premise of Governance theory is a qualitative shift in the nature of power relations: the idea that the past three decades have witnessed a shift from a world in
which states essentially monopolized governance functions, exercising a total-
ity of powers over their populations and territories, to one in which gover-
nance has become diffuse, fragmented, networked, and complex. It pre-
sents a movement from a world where governments were the principal agents
of governance and authority to one in which they jostle for influence in a
globalizing space of proliferating private and diverse nonstate agencies and
complex economic and social processes.

My point is not to dispute the many ways in which policymaking, or
the relationship of public policy to social, economic, and cultural life has
changed quite dramatically in recent decades. With its focus on fields like
regulation and policy networks, governance captures much of this. My prob-
lem is with the larger picture, the narrative in which these changes are set.
A large part of the problem is this: governance theory works with a some-
what exaggerated conception of the power of the postwar welfare state.
This has the effect, in turn, of overemphasizing the novelty and signifi-
cance of many of the phenomena of “steering,” “regulation,” and indirect
control typically grouped under the rubric of “new” governance. The glob-
alizing world of network governance is often presented in terms of a pre-
sumed past when authority really did reside within the boundaries of the
nation-state, when governments really could determine the fate of their peo-
ple, when states did monopolize the space of world affairs, and when polit-
ical rule was somehow more direct and authoritative. Susan Strange sums up
the view that governance assumes: “Where states were once the masters of
markets, now it is the markets which, on many crucial issues, are the mas-
ters over the governments of states.”

I want to suggest that we need a more nuanced account of the power of
the postwar state than this. We need to better understand how it governs if
we are to appreciate the nature of governance today. If governance theory
presents contemporary rule as fragmented, decentred, polyarchic, it does this
in part by constructing a sort of golden age in the past when states were
“whole.” Governance theory sometimes gives the impression that the post-
war welfare state really was one giant bureaucracy where authority simply
flowed from the centre to the margins. This is flawed on several counts. Most
of all, it neglects the fact that however bureaucratic or centralized, these were
at the same time liberal-democratic regimes. The names of Keynes, Beveridge, and Monnet may be associated with social and economic policies that are today considered somewhat statist and totalizing, yet a careful reading of the diagrams they produced for the welfare state reveals a problematic of “liberal collectivism.” Policies of social insurance, national health, or economic management varied considerably across western countries. But unlike the schemes which Scott identifies as “authoritarian high modernism,” such policies did not dream of total management or complete control; rather, these were modes of governing that, for all their faith in planning and political investment in the benign power of professional expertise, saw their task as one relating to a field of private freedoms and individual and collective responsibilities (saving, investing, caring, etc.) located “beyond” the state. These policies were received enthusiastically by governments—however selectively or opportunistically—precisely because they promised to avert the political possibility of state socialism. When we read welfare state policies in terms of their liberalism—albeit a social or collectivist rather than a neoliberalism—what we see is their continuity and affinity with many of the measures now labelled as “new” governance. They assume a state that cannot and should not govern imperiously, nor seek to control everything, but rather, must win the cooperation and consent of a dense interplay of actors beyond it populated by parents, doctors, lawyers, professionals, trade unions, investors, and others; they operate through “indirect” means. Put differently, the era of the welfare state was also a world of governance. As Foucauldian studies of “governmentality” have demonstrated, it too governed by assembling networks of actors, networks which cut across the nominal boundaries of state/society and public/private.

In sum, by neglecting to interrogate the many ways in which even the most interventionist welfare states governed “indirectly,” governance theorists make the present world of governance seem more novel than perhaps it is. They accord the postwar state an aura of political autonomy and de facto power which, perhaps, it never possessed. This is just one reason why narratives of declining state power and sovereignty should be treated with some caution.
Governance and the Metanarrative of “Complexity”

If we should be more reflexive about the antipolitical politics of governance theory and more critical of its narrative of state decline, we should also question the account it gives of its own inception, its own necessity. As noted earlier, governance theory is bound up with a particular narrative about our time. It explains the rise of governance at the level of institutions as the product of long-term developmental processes. Hence, governance is “particularly attributable to growing or changing societal interdependencies,” the outcome of “long-term societal trends such as differentiation and integration. These processes result in lengthening chains of interdependence” which multiply the participating actors. Governance, in short, represents a political response to the growth of social complexity.

What might we learn if we regard complexity not as a social condition rooted in long-term social processes but as a metanarrative? How might this move serve to denaturalize governance? Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson are among those who have called for greater attention to the “master-narratives” in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history and as social scientists. They note how “Our sociological theories and concepts are encoded with aspects of these master-narratives—Progress, Decadence, Industrialization, Enlightenment, etc—even though they usually operate at a presuppositional level of social science epistemology or beyond our awareness.”

If the idea of “civilization” underpinned much social and political thought in the nineteenth century, and if this metanarrative was reworked and displaced by those of “development” and “modernization” in the twentieth century, what is the metanarrative which underpins governance? What is the structure of presuppositions and assumptions that enables it to make sense as a “policy narrative?”

No doubt one could identify several; however, as I have already hinted, “complexity” seems to be a prominent candidate. Our societies are becoming ever more complex, it is argued. The problems we face are more intractable and less amenable to “top-down” or “linear” solutions. Complex societies call out for governance, for multilevel, networked, cooperative, and smart alternatives to statist forms of rule. Complexity theory may be more ambivalent about the future than modernization theory.
and with its emphasis on self-organizing systems, it holds out a different image of social order from modernization theory. However, it has a similar effect of convincing us that history has a necessary direction and logic. If we are moving from simple to complex society, governance presents itself as an appropriate response.

By inscribing the present within a history that is unfolding in some logical, determined fashion, metanarratives can have the effect of expelling or downplaying the role of politics. This was certainly the case with modernization theory. Similarly governance theory can have the effect of depoliticizing events that we should see more properly as questions of power.

Let us take the example of programmes of privatization. For more than two decades, these have been a privileged policy initiative of many governments and international agencies. Across a range of services and functions, national industries and systems of public provision have been replaced or hollowed out by markets and quasi-markets. We have seen a proliferation of public/private partnerships, regulatory agencies, and private or parastatal providers. Now a governance account would no doubt see in this transformation one more process of “complexification,” another area where “long-term societal trends such as differentiation and integration” are taking effect, resulting in “lengthening chains of interdependence.” Indeed, privatization is now prescribed by development agencies under the rubric of “good governance.” But to describe privatization in such terms, to inscribe it within the metanarrative of complexity, is to divest it of much of its political content. Privatization stands at the intersection of a host of political motivations, including controlling public expenditure, finding new outlets for profitmaking and popularizing capitalism with the mass public. But it is also determined by all manner of base and ignoble political ambitions—the slash and burn tactics of a departing government, the will to avenge past defeats at the hands of certain public sector unions, the need to hold together a shaky electoral coalition, and the will to demonstrate one’s neoliberal credentials in the watchful eyes of financial markets and lending agencies. Governance misses most of this. Privatization is a highly political strategy, but the discourse of governance almost encourages us to regard it as a natural, inevitable response to increasing complexity.
Conclusion: Other Forms of Power  The problem with the language of governance is not that it is wrong. It captures many novel and innovative aspects of our present. One of its peculiar features, however, is its conceptual ambiguity and elasticity. One frequently encounters a strategic slippage such that governance refers not merely to particular styles of coordination—marked by heterarchy, horizontality, partnership, etc.—but instead, it comes to stand as a more general account of the entire political structure. A good example of this is the current trend to retheorize the European Union as a multilevel system of governance. One gets the impression that the “essence” of the EU is governance. This move casts the EU in a relatively favourable light—as a consensus-oriented, problemsolving network-polity. For governance, as Marie-Claude Smouts points out, is not a neutral depiction of politics; rather, it offers “an eirenic [sic] representation of social life. It disregards the fight to the death, the phenomena of outright domination, and the problems that arise from the ungovernability of whole sections of international society… The underlying criterion of global governance is effectiveness: that an issue be managed, a problem resolved; that there be an accommodation of mutual interests.”

If we want to guard against this displacement of questions of power and domination, then we need to do at least two things. First, we could be more precise and use governance in a restricted fashion, reserving it to designate a specific style of rule and particular forms of coordination — policy networks, regulation, indirect rule etc. . In addition, we should consider alternative narratives. For instance, using the language of governance one can certainly capture such aspects of the European Union’s “eastern enlargement” as its complex bargaining structures, or the role of “soft governance.” Yet this governance picture will be incomplete. We need to combine and confront it with other analytical narratives. Here we might follow the lead of recent studies which interrogate EU enlargement in terms of concepts of “empire” and “coloniality.” This is not to suggest that the EU is repeating the imperialism of the nineteenth century but it does bring to the fore emergent relations of domination, tactics of control, and patterns of authority that are missed by a framework of governance. Something similar is achieved by Hardt and Negri when they displace the conventional globalization nar-
rative, and its tale of declining political sovereignty, with a different narrative of “Empire.” As they present it, Empire “is a decentred and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers.”56 Thus we are prompted to think about the present in terms not simply of the inexorable spread of markets, or the erosion of political power, but on the contrary, the crystallization of a “new global form of sovereignty.”

The more general point here is that governance has become the new *lingua franca* of the political and business establishments. Along with terms like “globalization” and “community,” it belongs to a “new planetary vulgate.”57 The professionals of politics and gurus of innovation use it to describe and rationalize what they do. Inasmuch as the language of governance allows political science to speak to the world of business and policy, perhaps this is a good thing, a marker of “policy relevance;” the downside is that a kind of circularity is produced. Our capacity to make sense of the present is undermined if we are limited to describing it in its own terms. The value of words like “empire” or “coloniality” is that they confront the political culture with terms that are alien to it.58 They allow us to think and act differently. Nikolas Rose has put it nicely: “It is a matter of introducing a kind of awkwardness into the fabric of one’s experience, of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter.”59 The task is to “decentre” governance, to see it as a particular narrative about our present, who we are, who we want to become—and not a form of existence that is simply given to us.

Notes

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Studies in Political Economy


2. More interdisciplinary in its approach, a growing Foucauldian literature on “governmentality” has developed within the English-speaking social sciences at approximately the same time as “governance.” A discussion of their similarities and differences is beyond the scope of this paper but others have already suggested how they might be compared. See, for example, Nikolas Rose, Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 15-24; Bob Jessop, “The Regulation Approach, Governance and Post-Fordism: Alternative Perspectives on Economic and Political Change,” Economy and Society 24/3 (1995), pp. 307-333, and Mitchell Dean’s discussion of “reflexive government” in his Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society (London: Sage, 1999), Chapter 9.


5. Rhodes, “The New Governance…”


9. Smouts, “The Proper Use…”


32. Smouts, “The Proper Use…,” p. 86.
34. Della Sala, “Constitutionalizing Governance…,” p. 11.
36. *Ibid*.


Rose and Miller, “Political Power beyond the State….”


Kooiman, “Societal Governance…,” p. 139.


But note the elasticity and flexibility of the dominant political culture and its capacity to recuperate and reverse critical terms. With the US-UK led invasion and occupation of Iraq, we find public intellectuals like Michael Ignatieff and Niall Ferguson seeking to rehabilitate and affirm a certain idea of empire in order to rationalize US foreign policy.